

*Effective Substance Abuse and
Mental Health Programs
for Every Community*

Al's Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices

Al's Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices is a resiliency-based early childhood curriculum and teacher training program that develops personal, social, and emotional skills in children 3 to 8 years old. Using 46 interactive lessons, Al's Pals teaches children how to—

- Express feelings appropriately; use kind words
- Care about others
- Think independently
- Accept differences; make friends
- Solve problems peacefully; use self-control
- Cope
- Make safe and healthy choices
- Understand that tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs are not for children

The lessons use guided creative play, brainstorming, puppetry, original music, and movement to develop children's social-emotional competence and life skills. A nine-lesson booster curriculum is used in second or third grade with children who have previously received the full program.

TARGET POPULATION

Al's Pals was originally designed for and piloted with preschool children considered to be at risk due to poverty and other factors. The program was initially piloted in Head Start and other community-based child development centers whose populations primarily included Black/African American and White children. Since the initial pilot, the program has been expanded and found to be effective with children 3 to 8 years old of all socioeconomic

PROVEN RESULTS

- Children who participate in Al's Pals are 2 to 5 times more likely to improve their use of positive social behaviors than children who do not participate. (Positive social behaviors include sharing, taking turns, using self-control, helping others, and using words to solve problems.)
- Children who participate in Al's Pals are 1.5 to 4 times more likely to improve their use of positive classroom coping skills than children who do not participate. (Positive classroom coping skills include talking about a problem with a friend or teacher or asking for help to solve a problem.)
- Children who do not participate in Al's Pals are 2 to 6 times more likely to increase their use of antisocial and aggressive behaviors than children in Al's Pals. (Antisocial/aggressive behavior includes hitting, kicking, name-calling, bullying, and destroying others' belongings.)

INTERVENTION

Universal

Selective

Indicated



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
www.samhsa.gov

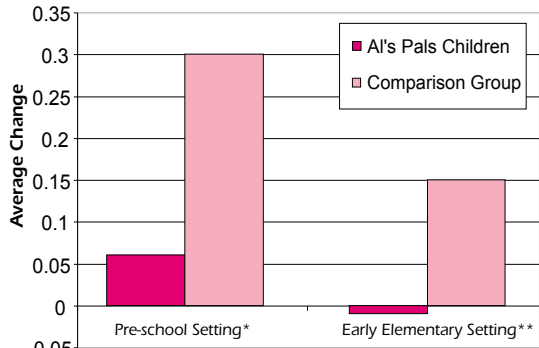
Outcomes*

- Significant increases in prosocial behaviors.
- Significant reductions in problem behaviors such as social withdrawal.
- Significant increases in positive coping behaviors such as seeking help to solve a problem.
- Significant decreases in negative coping behaviors such as the use of physical or verbal aggression to solve problems.
- Prevention of increases in anti-social and aggressive behaviors that might otherwise occur.

* Compared to children who did not participate in Al's Pals.

Teacher-reported change in antisocial/aggressive behavior in Al's Pals children v. comparison group

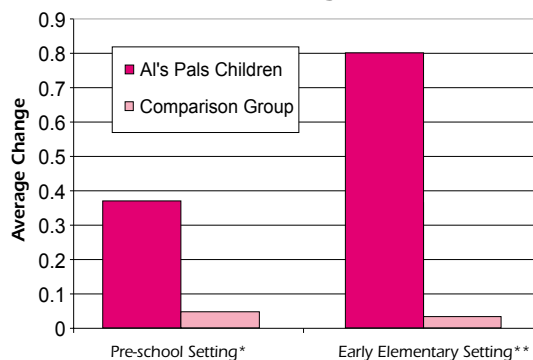
(Negative change indicates greater reductions; positive change indicates more antisocial behavior)



* Based on an experimental study in which the teachers completed pre and post behavior ratings on 218 children in Al's Pals and 181 children in a comparison group.

** Based on a quasi-experimental study of children in kindergarten, first and second grade classrooms involving 226 children in Al's Pals and 220 children in a comparison group.

Teacher-reported improvements in prosocial behavior in Al's Pals children v. comparison group



* Based on an experimental study in which the teachers completed pre and post behavior ratings on 218 children in Al's Pals and 181 children in a comparison group.

** Based on a quasi-experimental study of children in kindergarten, first and second grade classrooms involving 226 children in Al's Pals and 220 children in a comparison group.

and racial backgrounds living in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Al's Pals has been proven to work in preschools, early elementary school grades, after-school programs, and child care centers.

BENEFITS

- Strengthens children's social and life skills
- Prevents increased aggressive/antisocial behavior that might otherwise occur
- Helps children differentiate between safe and harmful substances and situations
- Helps children manage their own behavior, freeing teachers to do more teaching

HOW IT WORKS

Al's Pals has 46 core lessons that capture real-life childhood experiences and provide opportunities for the children to acquire and practice social and emotional skills. Designed for preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade children, the lessons are delivered by a classroom teacher for 10 to 15 minutes twice a week. An original hand puppet named Al is at the heart of the program, and serves as a positive role model. In addition to Al and puppet pals Ty and Keisha, children are engaged through a wide range of teaching tools including scripted puppet-led discussions, guided creative play, original songs, posters, color photographs, message pads, and books.

Through the lessons, children learn and practice positive ways to express feelings, relate to others, communicate, differentiate between safe and unsafe substances and situations, brainstorm ideas, and solve problems. By reinforcing the Al's Pals concepts throughout the day, the teacher shapes a caring environment, encouraging independent thinking, use of self-control, healthy decisionmaking, and peaceful problem solving. A nine-lesson booster curriculum may be used during the second or third grade to reinforce skills learned through the core lessons.

Al's Pals includes a parent component. Letters from Al are regularly sent home to inform parents about the life skills their children are learning and suggest activities parents can use to help their children practice and retain these skills. The curriculum also includes "Al-a-Grams"—school-to-home messages, delivered home by the children, that recognize positive behavior noted at school (e.g., caring about others' feelings or calming down).

IMPLEMENTATION ESSENTIALS

Complete lessons need to be delivered twice a week by a trained classroom teacher, in the sequence in which they are written. Teachers need to practice, reinforce, and model key Al's Pals concepts throughout the day, promoting a classroom environment of caring, cooperation, responsibility, and healthy decisionmaking. An implementation monitoring observation form is available to ensure fidelity.

Training

Training is provided by Wingspan, LLC, which distributes Al's Pals nationwide. Two-day training is required for all classroom teachers who will deliver the program; booster and advanced training sessions also are available.

Training is designed to—

- Increase understanding of how to apply the concepts of resiliency and protective factors to early childhood education
- Demonstrate effective use of the Al's Pals curriculum and build skills in using teaching approaches that support it

Program Materials

Each classroom needs its own curriculum kit, contained within a puppet house, consisting of:

- Two manuals of 46 interactive lessons
- Three original puppets
- Easy-to-follow puppet scripts
- Twelve original songs on cassette tapes or CD
- Oversized songbook
- Thirty-eight color photographs of real-life situations
- Fourteen sets of parent letters (also available in Spanish)
- Eight “Al-a-Grams” (bright, informative, school-to-home message pads, also available in Spanish)
- Calm down and problem-solving posters
- Two children's books

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Al's Pals was developed in 1993 in response to concerns for preschool children considered at risk who displayed increasing levels of aggressive behavior, lacked social skills, and mimicked drug use and sexual activity behaviors in their play, increasing the future risk for new and escalating problem behaviors. Applying resiliency research to practice, the developers of Al's Pals created a comprehensive intervention that develops life skills in young children. The program was piloted for 5 years in a variety of settings across several States and revised using teacher feedback and classroom implementation observations conducted by the program developers. Al's Pals has been expanded to successfully serve preschool through early elementary-aged children from all socioeconomic backgrounds. A companion parent education program, *Here, Now and Down the Road . . . Tips for Loving Parents*, is available for facilitators to use with parent groups. It reinforces the concepts of Al's Pals and fosters positive parent-child relationships. Outcome studies are currently being conducted to assess the impact of the parent education component.

TARGET AREAS

Protective Factors To Increase

Individual

- Social competence
- Empathy
- Emotional regulation
- Communication skills
- Self-discipline, self-control
- Problem-solving skills
- Goal setting
- Decisionmaking
- Healthy coping

Family

- Parental support of social-emotional skill development

Peer

- Positive peer relations

School

- Positive, caring classroom climate
- Involvement in decisionmaking
- Clear norms

Risk Factors To Decrease

Individual

- Aggression
- Antisocial behavior
- Lack of self-control
- Favorable attitudes toward alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs

Peer

- Peer rejection

School

- Inconsistent or lack of clear norms regarding alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs

EVALUATION DESIGN

Since 1994, more than 20 studies of Al's Pals have been conducted in preschools, elementary schools, and child care centers. These studies used teacher ratings to measure the program's effectiveness at developing prosocial behaviors and preventing antisocial/aggressive behaviors among participating children.

- An experimental design was used to evaluate Al's Pals in a large Head Start program in a study involving 399 children. Seventeen classrooms were randomly assigned to receive the intervention and 16 classrooms served as controls.
- A pre- and posttest comparison group design, involving 446 children, was used to evaluate the program's effectiveness in kindergarten and first- and second-grade classrooms.
- Replication studies involving thousands of children have been conducted in preschool and early elementary settings in Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, and Virginia using comparison and one-group pre- and posttest designs.

PROGRAM DEVELOPER

Susan R. Geller, M.S.

Al's Pals was developed at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) under the leadership of Susan R. Geller. Ms. Geller holds a master's degree in developmental psychology and has 25 years of experience in child development services and State-level prevention programming. As director of Prevention Services at VCU's Virginia Institute for Developmental Disabilities, Ms. Geller directed a team of experts in early childhood education, child development, clinical social work, substance abuse and violence prevention, conflict resolution, and creative expression to create Al's Pals. Ms. Geller currently manages Wingspan, LLC, which distributes Al's Pals nationwide as part of its mission to strengthen young children's personal, social, and emotional skills for life.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Susan R. Geller, President
Wingspan, LLC
4196-A Innslake Drive
Glen Allen, VA 23060
Phone: (804) 967-9002
Fax: (804) 967-9003
E-mail: sgeller@wingspanworks.com
Web site: wingspanworks.com

RECOGNITION

Model Program—Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Promising Program— Safe, Disciplined and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education

Effective Program—Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)